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## Parental autonomy support and honesty: The mediating role of identification with the honesty value and perceived costs and benefits of honesty



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### A B S T R A C T

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Previous research emphasizes the importance of honesty (or the absence of lying) in adolescent-parent communication as it is ultimately linked to adolescent non-delinquency (Engels, Finkenauer, & van Kooten, 2006). Empirical evidence also suggests that positive parental practices may prevent adolescents' lying (Darling, Cumsille, Caldwell, & Dowdy, 2006; Jensen, Arnett, Feldman, & Cauffman, 2004). This study tests an integrated model where perceived parental autonomy support and controlling parenting are expected to have opposite effects on adolescent's honesty in the parent-adolescent relationship via differential identification to the honesty value and perceived costs/benefits of being honest. Using structural equation modeling, results from 167 parent-adolescent dyads showed that autonomy support was associated with adolescents' identification to the honesty value and perceived low costs/high benefits of honesty. Opposite relations were observed with controlling parenting. Higher honesty value identification and low costs/high benefits of honesty in turn predicted adolescents' honesty. The importance of autonomy-supportive parenting in creating honest family settings is discussed.

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Adolescence entails various interpersonal transitions (Stattin & Magnusson, 1989) as adolescents develop new interests, meet new friends, and spend more time away from the family (Larson, Richards, Moneta, Holmbeck, & Duckett, 1996). These changes may affect parent-adolescent communication (Cumsille, Darling, & Martínez, 2010) by giving adolescents more occasions and potential reasons to hide information from their parents and even to lie to them (Smetana, 2008). Previous research shows that adolescents' lying to parents is associated with adolescents' maladaptive behavior (tolerance of deviance and reduced self-restraint; Jensen et al., 2004). Adolescent lying is also associated with less parental knowledge of adolescents' activities (Darling et al., 2006; Marshall, Tilton-Weaver, & Bosdet, 2005; Smetana, 2008), which is an important protective factor from adolescents' delinquency (Stattin & Kerr, 2000). In light of the importance of adolescents' honesty (or absence of lies), the present research draws on Self-determination Theory (SDT; Deci & Ryan, 1985, 2000) to address what parents can do to encourage honesty from their early adolescents.

### Adolescents' honesty

Adolescents' honesty within parent-adolescent communication refers to adolescents' behaviors of telling the truth and refraining from lying to their parents. While telling the truth is defined as stating an information that corresponds to reality,

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lying refers to sending a message that is intentionally deceptive (Bok, 1999). Previous research has mostly looked at adolescents' lying as a strategy for not disclosing information. In this context, Jensen et al. (2004) have found that, across various topics, 30%–70% of high school students report lying to their parents.

Empirical evidence suggests that parents play a major role in influencing their adolescents' lying. For example, adolescents who believe that parental authority is legitimate are less likely to lie to their parents (Cumsille et al., 2010). Furthermore, the adolescents who lie the most have mothers who display less warmth and who are more actively monitoring them (Cumsille et al., 2010). Previous studies have also linked adolescents' lying to negative parental socialization practices (Cumsille et al., 2010; Darling et al., 2006) and have shown positive parenting practices to be a strong negative predictor of lying (Darling et al., 2006). These studies converge in suggesting that parental autonomy support and controlling parenting (Grolnick, Deci, & Ryan, 1997), as defined by SDT, should be important predictors of adolescents' honesty.

#### *Parental autonomy support and controlling parenting*

Autonomy support (AS) and controlling parenting have been identified as core parental dimensions (Ryan, Deci, Grolnick, & La Guardia, 2006), especially in the context of value internalization (Grolnick et al., 1997) and within SDT, a theory of human motivation. SDT proposes that to function optimally and experience well-being, human beings must experience self-determination (Ryan & Deci, 2000). In this framework, to be self-determined is to endorse one's actions at the highest level of reflection. SDT also states that to foster self-determination, parents must be autonomy supportive. AS consists of considering children as distinct individuals and showing respect for their unique needs and feelings (Grolnick & Ryan, 1989). When parents are autonomy supportive towards their children, they acknowledge their child's feelings, give a rationale for rules and demands, and provide choice and opportunities for initiative taking (Joussemet, Landry, & Koestner, 2008; Koestner, Ryan, Bernieri, & Holt, 1984; Mageau et al., 2014). These behaviors have been shown to support children's inner motivational resources and foster their self-determination (Joussemet et al., 2008). In contrast, controlling parenting may be defined as the use of pressuring, dominating, and intrusive tactics that force adolescents to think, feel, and be in specified ways regardless of their own needs and feelings (Grolnick & Pomerantz, 2009; Ryan, 2005), thus undermining their self-determination. In past research, controlling parenting has most often been operationalized using the concept of psychological control (Becker, 1964; Schaefer, 1965a, 1965b), which includes behaviors such as love withdrawal, guilt-inducements and threats (Barber, 1996). However, Grolnick and Pomerantz (2009) have recently argued that it is not so much the target of the parent's control (i.e., children's thoughts or behaviors) that makes parenting controlling but the fact that parenting practices are pressuring, intrusive, and dominating. The term "controlling parenting" is thus preferred over the term "psychological control" because it encompasses psychological control while allowing for the possibility that parents may also be controlling regarding children's behaviors (e.g., forcing a child to play the piano to impress guests, regardless of his/her feelings).<sup>1</sup> In the present research, controlling parenting is operationalized using three specific controlling behaviors: the use of threats, guilt inducing criticisms, and the promotion of performance goals.

Previous research on socialization practices similar to AS (e.g., authoritativeness, maternal support) shows a negative link between autonomy-supportive practices and adolescents' lying. For example, Darling et al. (2006) showed that authoritative parents had children that lied less while Cumsille et al. (2010) showed that maternal support was less associated with a pattern of lying. The present research aims at replicating the relation between socialization practices and lying with the constructs of AS and controlling parenting. Another purpose of this study is to investigate the mechanisms accounting for the links between parenting practices and honesty.

#### **Mediating variables of the links between parenting practices and honesty**

Although past research has looked at the effect of socialization practices on lying, little is known about what explains this relation. The present research proposes two potential mechanisms. First, past research suggests that adolescents with more autonomy-supportive and less controlling parents should identify with their parents' values to a greater extent (Grolnick et al., 1997). Second, autonomy-supportive parenting should also create a family setting in which there are less costs and more benefits for adolescents to be honest.

#### *Identification with the honesty value*

Values are desirable and trans-situational goals that act as guiding principles in people's lives (Schwartz, 1992). In the present study, we consider that adolescents identify with the honesty value when they define themselves using this value and when they are self-determined in their motivation to act in accordance with this same value.<sup>2</sup> We thus assess identification

<sup>1</sup> Please note that in Grolnick and Pomerantz's (2009) framework, parenting behaviors aimed at offering guidance for the child's behaviors (e.g., setting limits, enforcing rules) are labeled "structure" instead of "behavioral control". This nomenclature clarifies the fact that parents can provide structure (e.g., set limits) without being controlling (e.g., Koestner et al., 1984).

<sup>2</sup> Some people may define themselves as being honest without being self-determined when acting honestly. It is also possible that some people are self-determined when being honest without considering that honest behaviors define who they are. In both of these cases, people would identify with the honesty value to a lesser extent than people who would both define themselves using the honesty value and be self-determined in their motivation to be honest.

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